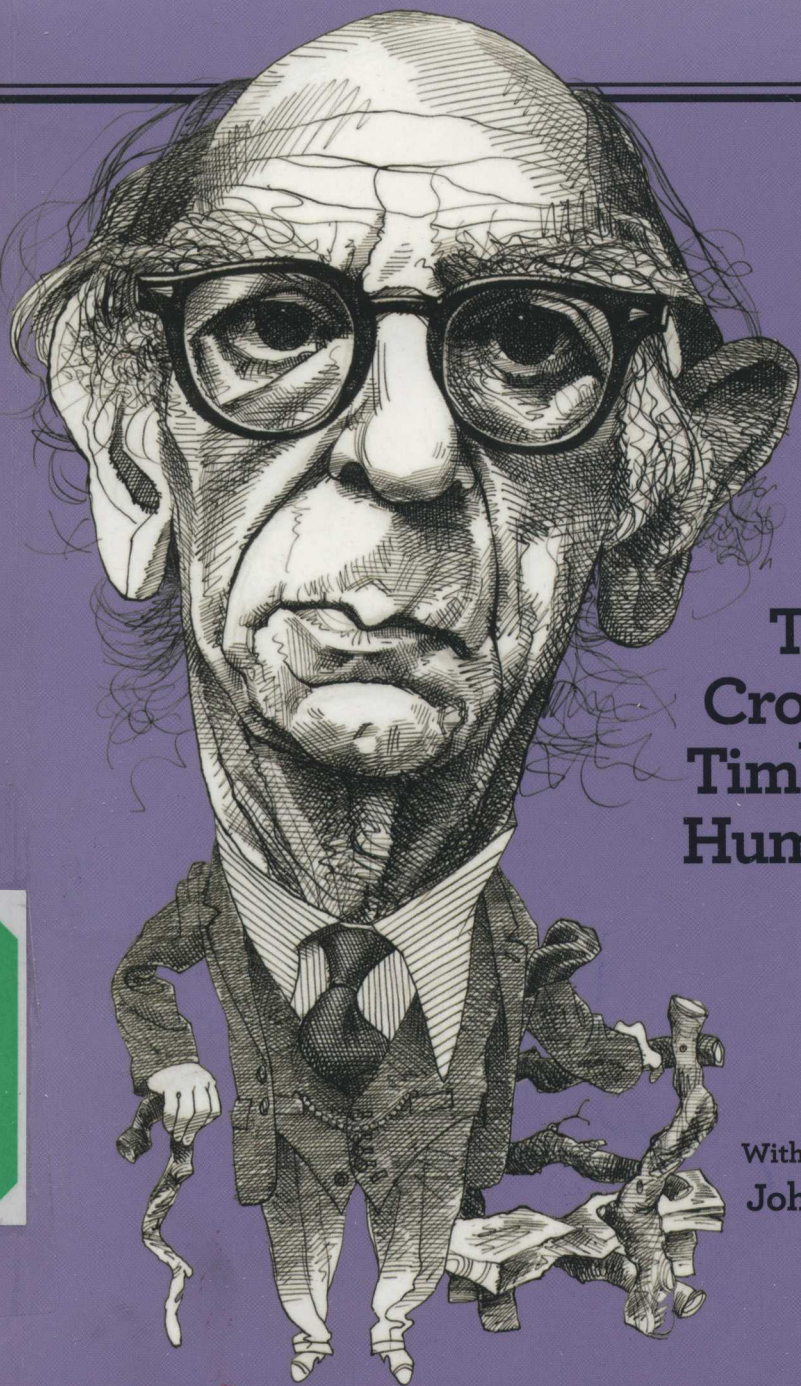


Isaiah Berlin



The Crooked Timber of Humanity

With a foreword by
John Banville

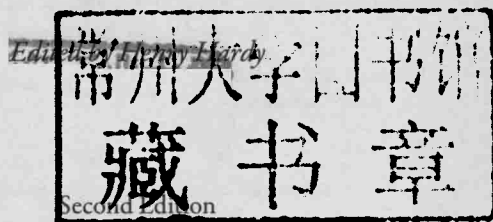
Edited by Henry Hardy

THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY

CHAPTERS IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS



ISAIAH BERLIN



Foreword by John Banville

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD

Published in the United States of America, its Colonies and
Dependencies, the Philippine Islands, and Canada by Princeton
University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work should be
sent to Permissions, Princeton University Press

press.princeton.edu

First published by John Murray 1990

First published in the US by Alfred A. Knopf 1991

Second edition published by Princeton University Press 2013

Copyright Isaiah Berlin 1947

© Isaiah Berlin 1959, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1988, 1990, 1992,
2004, 2013

Selection and editorial matter © Henry Hardy 1990, 2003, 2011, 2013

Foreword © John Banville 2013

The moral right of Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy to be identified as the
author and editor respectively of this work has been asserted

All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berlin, Isaiah, 1909–1997.

The crooked timber of humanity : chapters in the history of ideas /

Isaiah Berlin ; edited by Henry Hardy ;

foreword by John Banville. – Second edition.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-691-15593-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Philosophy.

2. Civilization, Modern. I. Title.

B29.B4465 2013

190–dc23

2012035271

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Garamond Premier Pro

Printed on acid-free paper ∞

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY

ISAIAH BERLIN WAS BORN IN RIGA, now capital of Latvia, in 1909. When he was six, his family moved to Russia; there in 1917, in Petrograd, he witnessed both Revolutions – Social Democratic and Bolshevik. In 1921 his family came to England, and he was educated at St Paul's School, London, and Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

At Oxford he was a Fellow of All Souls, a Fellow of New College, Professor of Social and Political Theory, and founding President of Wolfson College. He also held the Presidency of the British Academy. In addition to *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, his main published works are *Karl Marx*, *Russian Thinkers*, *Concepts and Categories*, *Against the Current*, *Personal Impressions*, *The Sense of Reality*, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, *The Roots of Romanticism*, *The Power of Ideas*, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, *Liberty*, *The Soviet Mind* and *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. As an exponent of the history of ideas he was awarded the Erasmus, Lippincott and Agnelli Prizes; he also received the Jerusalem Prize for his lifelong defence of civil liberties. He died in 1997.

Henry Hardy, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, is one of Isaiah Berlin's Literary Trustees. He has edited (or co-edited) many other books by Berlin, including the first three volumes of his letters, and is currently working on the remaining volume.

John Banville's novels include *The Book of Evidence* and *The Sea*, which won the 2005 Man Booker Prize, and, most recently, *The Infinities*. He is a longstanding enthusiast for Berlin's writing, and has reviewed many of his books for the *Irish Times*.

For further information about Isaiah Berlin visit

<<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/>>

ALSO BY ISAIAH BERLIN

*

Karl Marx
The Hedgehog and the Fox
The Age of Enlightenment
Russian Thinkers
Concepts and Categories
Personal Impressions
Against the Current
The Sense of Reality
The Proper Study of Mankind
The Roots of Romanticism
The Power of Ideas
Three Critics of the Enlightenment
Freedom and Its Betrayal
Liberty
The Soviet Mind
Political Ideas in the Romantic Age
Unfinished Dialogue
with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska
Unfinished Dialogue

*

Flourishing: Letters 1928–1946
Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960
Building: Letters 1960–1975

For Jon Stallworthy

[A]us so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht
ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden.

Out of the crooked timber of humanity
no straight thing was ever made.

Immanuel Kant¹

¹ The translation given above is IB's customary one. More literally: 'Out of timber as crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built.' Immanuel Kant, 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht' ('Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', 1784), *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1900-), viii 23, 22; see also xi below. Cf. Ecclesiastes 7. 13: 'Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?'

FOREWORD

John Banville

ISAIAH BERLIN WAS ONE of the most exciting thinkers of the twentieth century, and the essays in this volume, written over three decades, from the end of the 1950s to the 1980s, address some of the most urgent topics of our time. The excitement derives immediately from Berlin's unique tone of voice, which is the same on the page as it was in the lecture hall or before the microphone. He spoke with terrifying rapidity – Joseph Brodsky said his English was even faster than his Russian, 'courting the speed of light'¹ – in sentences of a length and complexity rarely encountered outside the pages of Proust. Yet he was never less than straightforward in his meaning, and the ideas and insights were rolled off with sparkling clarity. 'This darting, leaping style of speaking', his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, writes, 'is a style of thinking: he outlines a proposition and anticipates objections and qualifications as he speaks, so that both proposition and qualification are spun out in one and the same sentence simultaneously.'²

The result, for reader as for listener, brings on a curious kind of giddiness, a sensation of fizzing intellectual delight, as if one were being whirled round and round on a marvellously noisy

¹ 'Isaiah Berlin at Eighty', *New York Review of Books*, 17 August 1989, 44–5, at 44.

² Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London/New York, 1998), 4.

carousel. Who would have thought a book subtitled 'Chapters in the History of Ideas' would afford so much fun?

From the start Berlin was cast into the thick of things, and stayed there for the rest of his long life. He was born in 1909 in Riga, a former Hanseatic trading port and the capital of what is now Latvia and was then a province of the Russian empire. He was the only surviving child of a wealthy Jewish couple who later moved to Petrograd – St Petersburg – where they lived through the February and October Revolutions of 1917. The young Isaiah retained vivid memories of these events. In February he witnessed the anti-tsarist crowd surging through the streets on the way to storm the Winter Palace, and although he was only seven he understood something of the revolutionary euphoria that was sweeping the city.

The experience that left the most profound impression, however, was a brush with mob violence that he had one day at the end of the February Revolution when he was out for a walk with his governess. He remembered stopping to examine a volume by Jules Verne on sale on a pavement bookstall when a gang of men rushed past dragging a terrified policeman off to be lynched. Michael Ignatieff writes: 'Much later, in the 1930s, when contemporaries were intoxicated with revolutionary Marxism, the memory of 1917 continued to work within Berlin, strengthening his horror of physical violence and his suspicion of political experiment, and deepening his lifelong preference for all the temporising compromises that keep a political order safely this side of terror.'¹

By the 1930s the Berlins were settled in London, to which they had emigrated in 1921. Isaiah was eleven when the family came to Britain, and spoke hardly any English – he knew some forty English words, he later said, including the lyrics of *Daisy Bell* (*A Bicycle Built for Two*) – although within a year he had

¹ *ibid.* 24.

become fluent in the language. He was a brilliant student, first at St Paul's School in London and later at Corpus Christi, Oxford. By the age of 23 he had been elected to a fellowship at All Souls. He was to be an Oxford man all his life, save for the war years, when he worked for British Information Services in New York, and then at the British Embassies in Washington and Moscow. At the end of the war he met the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, a legendary encounter that was to have lasting repercussions for both of them, and that led to intensified harsh treatment of Akhmatova by the Soviet authorities.

These ventures into the great restive forests beyond the tranquil groves of academe brought a certain disapproval down upon Berlin from the professional philosophical community. Indeed, all through his life he was regarded as slightly suspect by the Oxbridge high consistory, although he numbered among his close friends the philosophers Stuart Hampshire, J. L. Austin and A. J. Ayer, who, even more than Berlin, was a *bon vivant* and enthusiastic partygoer. And he was the main mover in the setting up, in 1966, of Wolfson College, Oxford, a project that, as Ignatieff remarks, meant that 'Berlin had to call on reserves of political acumen that his friends never suspected.'¹ The funds for the college came from the Ford Foundation and the Wolfson Foundation, set up by Sir Isaac Wolfson, the president of Great Universal Stores. Both of these institutions Berlin had wooed and won; no wonder there were sniffs from high table.

Berlin the activist was all of a piece with Berlin the philosopher. He had a deep and engrossing interest in the world of commonplace experience, and believed firmly that it is the thinker's duty to be ever alive to the lessons of history and to engage with the broad politics of his time. His wartime dispatches from Washington became famous among Whitehall and War Office policymakers. Having no specific area of duty or expertise at the

¹ *ibid.* 264.

embassy, Berlin 'was free', his biographer writes, 'to range across all of official Washington, lunching, dining, gossiping, and once a week assembling the materials for a digest of American opinion to be sent to the Foreign Office, and through them to other Whitehall departments, including the Cabinet Office'.¹ His weekly reports were read by, among others, Winston Churchill and the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. These were the official versions; clandestinely, another version, the 'bootleg' one, containing the gossip which would have been, as he said, 'found too dazzling by the twilight denizens of Whitehall',² was sent to his friends in London. Imagine, in the midst of rationing, blackouts and nightly bombing raids, being the recipient of one of *those* incandescent missives from across the ocean.

Berlin was, then, a kind of ideal melding of philosopher and practical man of affairs. Yet he had no illusions as to the extent of what could be achieved in the sphere either of thought or of action. 'We can do only what we can: but that we must do, against difficulties.'³ He knew that his cautiously meliorist view of human affairs and human problems was unlikely to set racing the pulses of impatient young men and women of good intent, and would certainly not stay the hands of 'the prophets with armies at their backs'.⁴ Yet he held to the view that, 'perhaps, the best that one can do is to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings – at the very least to prevent them from attempting to exterminate each other, and, so far as possible, to prevent them from hurting each other'. This, he admits, 'is not, *prima facie*, a wildly exciting programme [...] not a passionate battle-cry to inspire men to sacrifice and martyrdom

¹ *ibid.* 112.

² Letter from H. G. Nicholas to Berlin, 21 May 1943, quoted *ibid.* 113.

³ 19 below (subsequent plain numbers also refer to the present volume).

⁴ 1.

and heroic feats'.¹ Yet what he advocates may be the most that can be done, and, as such, surely, as he said, it must be done.

The central tenet of Berlin's political and social philosophy is, like all sound principles, entirely simple, and he states it again and again throughout his work. He believes in and sets the highest store by the doctrine of pluralism, as he called it. In the first essay here, the ironically titled 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', he sets out a plain definition of what pluralism means:

the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other [...]. Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is possible only because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them.²

The danger, of course, is that pluralism will be confused with relativism – mere relativism, one is tempted to say – and in 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', the core ideas of which will have echoes throughout this collection, Berlin is determined to make a distinction between the two, and to make us recognise and accept the distinction. Thinkers such as Vico and Herder, he writes, and even the much maligned Machiavelli, argue that members of one culture can readily understand 'the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space'.³ These 'foreign' or 'alien' values may be found unacceptable, 'but if [people] open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realisation of which men could be fulfilled'.⁴ This is the pluralist view; relativism is altogether different: 'I take it to mean a doctrine according to

¹ 47.

² 11.

³ 9.

⁴ *ibid.*

which the judgement of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood.¹ As he insists elsewhere, "There is a world of objective values."²

Robert Silvers, the editor of the *New York Review of Books* and a good friend of Berlin's, recalls Berlin telling him how one night at an Oxford table the guests were asked to name the figure from the past they would most have wished to have had dinner with, and Berlin without hesitation named William James. That the author of *A Pluralistic Universe* should seem an ideal dining companion for a latter-day champion of pluralism is not surprising. It reminds us of the similarities between these two wonderful, wise and accommodating figures. James, like Berlin, was a philosopher whose hands were plunged deep in the common life of men, and Berlin would surely have endorsed James's recommendation of 'incompleteness, "more", uncertainty, insecurity, possibility, fact, novelty, compromise, remedy and success'³ as desiderata for a fulfilled and useful life. Both men maintained an enthusiasm for variety and heterodoxy and an openness to the world that is both exemplary and endearing.

Like all exciting books, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* has its heroes and its villains, but, given the author's subtlety of mind and breadth of temperament, they vary in their villainy and their heroism, and sometimes, indeed, switch roles. The collection is beautifully constructed – what a devoted, scrupulous and creative editor Berlin has in Henry Hardy – and forms a classic arch shape.⁴ The keystone is the magisterial essay, one of Berlin's finest,⁵ on Joseph de Maistre. This frightening figure

¹ 80.² 10.³ William James, *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 426.⁴ As Alan Bullock has pointed out, how apt it is that a volume entitled *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* should end with an essay called 'The Bent Twig'.⁵ In 1960 he submitted the essay to the *Journal for the History of Ideas*, which effectively turned it down, asking for such heavy cuts and revisions that he was bound to

had slipped somewhat into the shadows until Berlin, with all due reservations and caveats, drew him out into the light of day again to fill us with shock and awe. Worked on over decades and in 1960 put away for further revisions, which were never made, the piece traces the twisted strands of Maistre's relentlessly ferocious thinking, which is at once atavistic and prophetic. An ultra-ultramontane Catholic, Maistre from his diplomatic exile in St Petersburg called down elegantly formulated execrations on revolutionaries, Romantics, empiricists, liberals, technocrats, secularists, egalitarians, while approving only the pope, or at least the papacy, the Jesuits and the few surviving antediluvians like himself – 'français, catholique, gentilhomme',¹ in Berlin's characterisation – who might be counted on to stand in the way of the filthy modern tide. The essay is a splendid thing, invigorating and alarming in equal measure, and shows Berlin at his comprehensive and pellucid best.

Was he the last of a line, the final full stop to the great winding melodious sentence which intellectual Jewry had been writing since Moses descended the mount bearing the tablets of the law? One of his most admirable traits was his relentless and humorous self-depreciation, even if at times it smacked faintly of disingenuousness. 'I have not the slightest faith in anything I write myself,' he told a correspondent. 'It is exactly like money – if you make it yourself, it seems a forgery.'² In the case of his work, we, his readers, have the luxury of disagreeing. Few more authentic and compelling voices sounded in the blood-boltered century that we have just survived, by the skin of our teeth.

abandon the attempt to publish it, as he did. As Henry Hardy has remarked, this was rather like the *Journal of Theology* turning down one of Saint Paul's epistles on the grounds that it was repetitive and covered too much familiar ground.

¹ 98.

² Letter from Berlin to Jack Stephenson, 21 January 1963, quoted by Ignatieff, op. cit. (xi/2), 262.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Neither a be-all nor an end-all be.

Dreamt by J. L. Austin¹

THIS BOOK BEGAN LIFE AS the fifth of four volumes. At the end of the 1970s, in the four-volume series that began life under the collective title *Selected Writings*,² I brought together most of the essays so far published by Isaiah Berlin which had not hitherto been made available in a collected form. His many writings had been scattered, often in obscure places, most were out of print, and only half a dozen essays had previously been collected and reissued.³ Those four volumes, together with the list of his publications which one of them (*Against the Current*) contained,⁴ the first edition of the present volume, a volume of shorter pieces,⁵ and five volumes in which I published much of

¹ 'Pretending', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 32 (1958), 278/16 ('I dreamt a line that would be a motto for a sober philosophy').

² *Russian Thinkers* (co-edited with Aileen Kelly: London and New York, 1978; 2nd ed., London etc., 2008), *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (London, 1978; New York, 1979), *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London, 1979; New York, 1980; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013) and *Personal Impressions* (London, 1980; New York, 1981; 2nd expanded ed., London, 1998; Princeton, 2001). The present volume was first published in London in 1990, and in New York in 1991.

³ *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), now incorporated in *Liberty* (Oxford and New York, 2002), and *Vico and Herder* (1976), now incorporated in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London and Princeton, 2000). Other collections had appeared only in translation.

⁴ Its most up-to-date printed version appeared in the first Princeton University Press edition (2001), but it is also posted in regularly updated form on the official website of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, 'The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library', <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/>>.

⁵ *The Power of Ideas* (London and Princeton, 2000).

his previously unpublished work,¹ made much more of his *oeuvre* readily accessible than before.

The present volume – first published in 1990, and devoted, like *Against the Current*, to the history of ideas – was effectively if not formally an additional volume of Berlin's *Selected Writings*. It contains one early essay which had never previously been published, three essays written in the 1980s, and four essays excluded from *Against the Current* for various reasons explained in my preface to that volume: three of these four had happily since become available for collective reissue; the fourth, 'The Bent Twig', omitted only because it was too similar to another essay in the volume on the same topic (nationalism), nevertheless contains much that is distinctive, and fully earned its place in this different company.

The essay published here for the first time, on Joseph de Maistre, had had a long gestation, starting in the 1940s if not before, and was put aside in 1960 as needing further revision, having been rejected on grounds both of length and of content by the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. However, it was so nearly ready for publication, and contained so much of value, that it seemed right to include it here. Although the author added a few new passages, and redrafted others, it was not revised in any systematic way to take full account of subsequent work on Maistre, which in any case did not affect its central theses.

The details of original publication of the essays reprinted from elsewhere are as follows:

¹ *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London, 1993; New York, 1994) – now incorporated in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (xix/3) – *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (London, 1996; New York, 1997), *The Roots of Romanticism* (London and Princeton, 1999; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013) *Freedom and its Betrayal* (London and Princeton, 2002), and finally *The Soviet Mind* (Washington, 2004), part of whose contents had been published before, sometimes pseudonymously. There is also a collection drawn from the whole range of his work, intended to provide the 'essential' Isaiah Berlin: *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (co-edited with Roger Hausheer: London, 1997; New York, 1998; 2nd ed., London, 2013).